EXECUTIVE POLICY COMMITTEE

QUESTION PERIOD

Minute No. 210
Councillor Wyatt made reference to the proposed budget cuts of $250,000 for boulevard maintenance and $115,000 for weed control. He questioned how this could occur when the City was increasing arts funding by $500,000.

His Worship Mayor Murray stated that decisions were made to reduce some areas such as boulevard maintenance as a result of the $40 million budget shortfall. He cited that these were decisions that needed to be made in tough budget times. His Worship noted that arts and culture was one of the biggest drivers of quality of life, which accounted for the increase in this area.

Councillor Wyatt questioned the City's priorities and whether tree pruning was less important than the arts.

His Worship responded that all areas are important. He cited that in 1997, the City had zero dollars in the budget for residential street repair and that this year the budget contained $20 million for this purpose. He cited that the City was now spending more on infrastructure every year than it had the year before. He also noted that $20 million was put into Red River College, monies were put into True North, the ball park and the Millennium Library, and that the Kenaston Underpass was going to be built. He stated that the City was going to do these things because it could not stand still, it must move ahead. His Worship stated that it is always a balance and noted that it while it was not a perfect budget, it was a good one.

Councillor Wyatt stated that the service cuts were starting to add up and were starting to affect the citizens and questioned what the Mayor was going to do about that, to which His Worship noted that the money to be spent on residential streets had been increased; the City has put a priority on fire, police and paramedic services and was unable to accommodate everything without some cuts.

With reference to the budget, Councillor Steek questioned if the request for a full time equivalency by the police for an additional $800,000 was in this year's review, or was it removed because it was a full time equivalency request.

His Worship responded that the staffing level in the Winnipeg Police Services had gone from a complement of 1,110 six years ago, to not less than 1,220 in 2004. He cited that the first responder budgets had gone up by $61 million over the last five years, a 33% increase. He stated that it was unlikely that you could find a five year period in the history of the City of Winnipeg that saw those departments get a similar 33% increase.

Councillor Steek questioned how discussions were going with the Province with respect to a potential singular Assessment Department.

Executive Policy Committee - Question Period (continued)

His Worship advised that a public consultation process had been laid out over the next 12 months with the Province. He stated that Winnipeg and Newfoundland are the only places in Canada where municipalities have to run their own assessment operations and stated that an audit report had pointed out the very high cost of administering the assessment process. His Worship noted that formal discussions would be getting underway soon.

Councillor Steek questioned if His Worship had received the administrative document wherein the Winnipeg Police Service asked for 20 additional officers at a cost of $800,000 for the year 2004, and an additional $300,000 for part time personnel.

His Worship stated that the Winnipeg Police Service and every civic department were asked for ideal scenarios and noting that if budget amounts improved, a list of add-ons from departments was considered. He further stated that as part of the budget process, the administration prepares a list of possible reductions. He noted that the Executive Policy Committee, in recommending the budget, had gone to great lengths to try and accommodate all the new requests from the Winnipeg Police Service.

With reference to an announcement that the City would be getting a $7 million GST rebate, of which 30% emanates from the waste and water utility, Councillor De Smedt stated he was concerned that the City would be taking these funds from the utility to be used for general budget purposes, and requested the Mayor's position on this issue.

His Worship noted that the GST rebate was not part of the new deal discussions and stated that he was very supportive of the idea of rationalizing revenues to expenditures. He stated that the City would have to review the GST rebate process as the 2005 and 2006 budgets were developed.

Councillor Smith cited an earlier reference by the Mayor of 100 athletic fields and questioned if the Mayor could furnish Council with a list of these 100 fields, to which His Worship replied that he would ask the administration putting together the public use facilities study to provide an inventory.

Councillor Wyatt stated that as the Mayor was not prepared to take $500,000 out of the arts funding budget, would he be prepared to cut $500,000 out of the EPC Secretariat budget ?

His Worship replied that although a small reduction was made in some areas of the budget, multi-million dollar increases in related infrastructure areas had been made and that this must be taken into account when looking at the overall budget. His Worship stated that he was looking forward to the suggestions that Councillor Wyatt had on where the City could find the money to enhance boulevard maintenance.

Executive Policy Committee - Question Period (continued)

Councillor Wyatt questioned if the Mayor was prepared to be in contravention of the Manitoba Noxious Weeds Act in light of the fact that while an extra $500,000 was being budgeted for the arts, the City was not able to keep up with on going boulevard maintenance.

His Worship stated that while the amount of money for boulevard maintenance was being reduced, Winnipeggers were excited about other things, such as the fact that less toxic materials were being put on the boulevards and advances in mosquito control.